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TAGS: [PRL](#) [PGOV](#) [PBTS](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: GREEK ISLANDS: A GATEWAY TO EUROPE FOR ILLEGAL
MIGRANTS

REF: A. ATHENS 1270
[1](#)B. ATHENS 920
[1](#)C. ATHENS 260
[1](#)D. 07 ATHENS 2305

Classified By: A/DCM Timothy Haley for reasons 1.4(b and d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) ver-increasing numbers of illegal immigrants (Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians, Somalis, and others) are using boats and rafts to travel from Turkey to Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, making the islands the preferred route for these immigrants into the EU. The wave of newcomers has all but overwhelmed the local Greek authorities charged with detaining and fingerprinting the immigrants, and then housing them in holding facilities until they are released. We visited one new holding center on the island of Samos; it is one of only two in Greece that UNHCR sees as meeting international standard, and even it is at double its capacity because of the influx. Despite a bilateral agreement on the return of aliens who entered from Turkey, Greek officials universally assert that Turkey has been able to avoid taking back more than a small handful of the migrants. Greek officials on the islands release the aliens as soon as procedures permit (anywhere from a few days to three months after they are detained) and give them a ferry ticket to the Greek mainland and a letter instructing them to leave Greece within 30 days. Once on the mainland, they attempt to stow away on ferries to Italy and other European countries where they have a better chance of receiving asylum than in Greece. Everyone agrees it is not a satisfactory system -- either in terms of the aliens' well-being or in terms of effective border control that would screen for terrorists or criminals -- but the combination of EU regulations, various states' laws, and the unwillingness of Turkey to accept the return of the immigrants has left Greek officials unable to find an alternative. End Summary.

Local Officials' Summer of Discontent

[1](#)2. (SBU) The UNHCR Head of Office in Athens, Giorgos Tsarabopoulos, told us September 2 that while the number of illegal migrants trying to enter Europe at two other traditional locations -- the Canary Islands (Spain) and Lampedusa (Italy) -- was declining, the number entering through Greek islands had been growing dramatically for at least two years, indicating that for alien smugglers Greece is now the "main route" into Europe. The result, Tsarabopoulos said, was a "very alarming situation" in which all detention centers are overcrowded and resource-strapped local authorities come under tremendous pressure. He said there were now two centers that meet international standards, on the islands of Samos and Evros, with a third on the

mainland in Sparta set to open soon. Even these, however, are already overcrowded, and many older, substandard centers continue to operate. (Note: Greece has repeatedly come under sharp criticism from EU officials, UNHCR, human rights NGOs, and others for poor conditions in the detention centers, including the former facility in Samos, which was closed in 2007. See ref C. End Note.)

13. (SBU) Local officials throughout the Aegean have been outspoken about the worsening situation, and have made pointed pleas to the central government for help. To take some examples from news reports in September alone: Samos officials issued an urgent plea for help in dealing with the deluge of immigrants "suffocating" the island, asking for support for lawyers, translators, and other professionals. Hotel owners in Patmos have protested against the hundreds of migrants on their island, and local citizens are reportedly acting as "civil guards" to prevent migrants from entering certain resorts there. Officials in the Dodecanese islands have issued a written plea to Athens for help dealing with the "desperate" situation there. In early September residents on the island of Agathonisi (permanent population 150) protested the arrival of 570 migrants in a single five-day period, and the arrival of almost 3,500 since the start of the year. UNHCR's Tsarbopoulos told us that local prefects representing both ruling and opposition parties (for example, those in Samos and Lesbos) see the problem in exactly the same way.

14. (C) Greek Coast Guard Security Directorate Commander Yannis Chortis shared with us September 30 statistics that quantified the surge. From 2002 to 2006, the Coast Guard

detained a fairly steady number of migrants at sea, between 2,000 and 4,000 per year. In 2007, the number shot up to 9,240, and the 2008 totals had already reached 10,514 as of September 28. (The numbers do not include immigrants detained by the police or other agencies on land.) There were similar increases in the number of alien smugglers arrested and boats confiscated. Chortis said the vast majority of these migrants traveled to Greece from Turkey, although there were also smuggling routes from Egypt.

An Island at the Edge of Europe

15. (SBU) We visited the island of Samos September 24, and met with leading local officials and law enforcement. Samos is only about one mile from the Turkish coast, and while the towns and beaches were still full of late-season European tourists, it was easy to spot some of the islands' other (less welcome) visitors walking along the waterfront in the town of Samos. We witnessed a table full of locals at a seaside cafe calling out to a nearby Coast Guard vehicle -- "Did you see them? They went that way" -- after two suspected migrants limped past; in this case the Coast Guard, whose jurisdiction is limited to the waters and the port, did not pursue. Everyone we met stressed to us that islanders are sympathetic to the migrants, in part because Greeks have their own experience of being refugees, but the burden of such a large number of aliens on the small island communities was creating social tensions.

16. (C) Samos Prefect Emmanouel Karlas, the highest official on Samos and several nearby islands, described the situation to us as "unprecedented" and "nregulated," and expressed fears that it was only going to get worse. A doctor himself, Karlas said the immigrants were "potential time bombs" for pandemic diseases with long incubation periods that medical checks on the island could not screen for. Deputy Prefect Stylianos Thanos said the island's new "reception center" for the migrants was a great improvement, but it had a downside: more immigrants chose to go to Samos because of the better accommodations, and officials on some other islands have complained that their own immigrants should be sent there. Thanos said the local government appeals to Athens on a daily basis for more resources.

17. (C) Coast Guard Deputy Harbormaster Lieutenant George

Psarakis told us the Coast Guard patrols the sea around the island only at night, and has only one or at most two boats available at any given time. He said the aliens come in inflatable rafts through treacherous waters north or south of the island; they do not come from the east -- the closest point to Turkey -- because that area is a Turkish "national park" with Turkish military patrols that deter smugglers. Psarakis said it takes Coast Guard boats an hour to get from one side of the island to the other, and each incident with aliens consumes two to three hours out of the patrol. Given these resource constraints, many of the immigrants make it to the island. Others, sometimes over 100 a night, are intercepted at sea, but even they end up on Samos, because they intentionally destroy their rafts so that the Greek Coast Guard will be compelled to rescue them. Psarakis expressed confidence that all immigrants to Samos are detained, if not by the Coast Guard at sea then by the police on land. Others we talked to, including Mayor Filippos Petrouskas, were not so sure. Petrouskas told us that during the previous week ten migrants had camped out in a park outside city hall; when he asked them to leave, he said they begged to be arrested.

What Awaits an Illegal Migrant

¶8. (C) As explained to us by Samos Deputy Police Director Panayotis Kordousis, when police detain a migrant they first take him or her to the hospital for a medical exam, then to the new detention center on the hill above Samos town. There the migrants are fingerprinted and housed for a period of time -- from a few days to three months -- depending on their stated country of origin. Since most of the migrants understand the rules and have destroyed their travel documents before being detained, Kordousis said, they naturally tend to claim citizenship in those countries with a shorter period of detention. Kordousis said the fingerprints are entered in a database and checked against INTERPOL records, but he did not rule out the possibility that many of the immigrants might be released before local authorities were notified of any INTERPOL "hits" on the fingerprints. He said there was a risk of terrorists entering Europe in this

wave of immigrants; noting that a two-time illegal immigrant had killed a famous actor in Athens, Kordousis asked us to "imagine if that had been a terrorist."

¶9. (SBU) Police escorted us to the outer fence of the detention facility, where we witnessed local police and prefecture employees providing food and other services to a large number of detainees of both genders, most of them young and many with children. The facility consisted of a number of trailers, with one in front serving as a cafeteria, and near the front was a well-equipped playground and basketball court. We saw new arrivals being issued large sacks containing a mattress and other items, which they carried up to the living quarters. Because the center is at approximately double its capacity of 250, many of these mattresses will be placed on the floor.

¶10. (SBU) Upon completing the required term in the detention center, the aliens are then released with a ferry ticket to a port on the Greek mainland, and a letter instructing them to leave the country within a month. The Coast Guard told us they monitor the outgoing ferries, to ensure that only those aliens who have gone through the legal process board them. The police agreed that it would be difficult to leave on a ferry without documents, although Mayor Petrouskas told us he thought it was possible. At the mainland port of Patras, many aliens live in shanties while they await their chance to stow away on ferries to Italy and elsewhere. (Comment: The Greeks of course have some incentive to look the other way as the immigrants leave and move the problem on to another jurisdiction. End Comment.) Few aliens seek asylum in Greece, where asylum approval rates are extremely low. As Greek officials explained, however, under the provisions of the Dublin Agreement other EU countries can return to Greece any illegal aliens found in other countries who can be traced to Greece. In some cases, courts in Europe have begun

refusing to do so because of Greece's low rate of granting asylum.

The Role of Turkey

11. (C) Everyone we met in Samos -- including the Prefect and Deputy Prefect, who were otherwise at pains to stress their good relations with Turkish officials -- said a major part of the problem was Turkey's failure to prevent the aliens from embarking and Turkey's unwillingness to accept practically any of them back, despite Turkey having signed a bilateral agreement on return. Greek Foreign Minister Bakoyannis has raised Turkey's commitments under the agreement with Turkish Foreign Minister Babacan (ref D). Psarakis said that when the Greek Coast Guard sees a raft of immigrants in Turkish waters, its first action is to try to notify the Turkish Coast Guard; he said the Turks respond "two times out of ten." Psarakis said the Greeks then stop the raft at the borderline while continuing to try to contact the Turks, but this almost always fails because the aliens destroy the raft to force the Greeks to rescue them. He said the Greeks had evidence of Turkish complicity in transporting the migrants, referring to a recent controversy in which the Turkish Coast Guard allegedly dumped aliens in Greek waters, and in other cases allegedly towed rafts full of migrants to the Greek side (ref A). The Coast Guard's Chortis expressed some sympathy for the immigration challenge facing Turkish officials -- calling it even more difficult than the Greeks' -- but he said the vast numbers of smuggling networks coming from Turkey (some using motorboats and quite sophisticated techniques) suggested police corruption in Turkey was a major part of the problem.

Comment

12. (C) Illegal immigration has been a problem in Greece for a number of years -- along Greece's northern border as well as in the islands -- but the dimensions of the problem in the islands have exploded over the last couple of years. This has produced considerable finger-pointing, with some EU bodies and international NGOs criticizing the Greeks for failing to meet basic requirements in caring for the immigrants, and local officials in turn blaming Athens and the EU for not giving them the resources to deal with the problem. Although no one seems to have a solution, Greek officials at both the national and local levels acknowledge the dangers of the status quo. Deputy Minister of Merchant Marine Panagiotis Kammenos, who is responsible for the Coast Guard, told DCM September 17 that he thought both domestic and transnational terrorist groups could make use of the wave

of immigrants entering the EU through Greece. The dangers of contraband smuggling, human trafficking, and other kinds of transnational crime are also obvious, and the consequences of the problem could be felt well beyond Greece. In order to help address the problem, Embassy DAO and ODC are currently working with the Greek Coast Guard to help them procure better ships, aircraft, and surveillance systems, so that they are on par with the systems now in use by Spain and Italy, where the number of immigrants has declined. Nevertheless, it is clear that Europe faces a major challenge in securing its borders, and the Greek islands appear to be its most vulnerable spot.

SPECKHARD